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Walker River tribe pulls permission for Yucca Mountain rail line

LAS VEGAS (AP) -- A federal proposal to ship nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain along a western Nevada rail corridor has been dealt a blow, after the Walker River Paiute Tribe withdrew its permission to use a route through its reservation.

The tribal council passed a resolution Tuesday removing the tribe from a federal environmental impact study that included a rail segment for shipments of spent nuclear fuel along the outskirts of tribal lands north of Walker Lake.

"After considering the information we had gathered to date and discussions with our membership, the tribal council made the decision not to continue with the Department of Energy's process," tribal Chairwoman Genia Williams said in a statement.

"The tribe will not allow nuclear waste to be transported on rail through our reservation," Williams said.

The Walker River Paiutes had faced pressure from tribe members and from nearby communities worried about the possibility of nuclear waste traveling through northern Nevada.

Sparks Mayor Geno Martini said following a presentation Monday by the head of Nevada's anti-Yucca Nuclear Projects Agency that he would ask the tribe to rescind its invitation for the U.S. government to study the rail line.

Energy Department officials had considered the route, dubbed the Mina corridor, as a possibly cheaper and easier route to transport nuclear waste from around the nation to a proposed repository at Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Allen Benson, an Energy Department and Yucca Mountain spokesman in Las Vegas, said the tribe's decision means the Mina corridor will

be dropped from the department's choices of potential rail lines to Yucca Mountain.

But Benson said the Energy Department would still include the Mina route in an impact statement expected to be released in October.

Elimination of the Mina corridor "certainly simplifies DOE's options," said David Blee, executive director of the U.S. Transport Council, a coalition of nuclear waste shippers.

The Energy Department has said it favored a 319-mile rail corridor to Yucca that originates at Caliente in eastern Nevada.

But some analysts have said the so-called Caliente corridor would be more expensive and more challenging to build than the 209-mile north-south Mina route, which could use old rail beds in some areas.

Nevada officials fighting the Yucca repository said nuclear waste from California likely would travel through Reno and Sparks, which sparked local opposition.

Bob Loux, Nuclear Projects Agency director, welcomed the tribe's announcement.

"This essentially would cut off use of the whole Mina corridor. I guess they're back to Caliente," Loux said.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., a staunch opponent of the federal plan to entomb the nation's nuclear waste in Nevada, hailed the tribe's decision as another blow to the Yucca Mountain project, which he said was "on its last legs."

Information from: Las Vegas Review-Journal, <http://www.lvrj.com>